

RERC on Telecommunications Access
Gallaudet University
800 Florida Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20008
February 28, 2002

Mr. William F. Caton
Acting Secretary
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

Re: Ex Parte Presentation
WT Docket No. 01-309

Dear Mr. Caton:

On February 27, 2002, Judy Harkins and Karen Peltz Strauss of the Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center on Telecommunications Access met with Kris Monteith, Blaise Scinto, Mindy Littell, Pat Forster, Jerry Stanshine, Pam Gregory and Janet Sievert for the purpose of discussing the Commission's proceeding on wireless phones and hearing aid compatibility. Materials which were distributed and discussed are attached.

Sincerely,

/s/

Karen Peltz Strauss
Policy Consultant
RERC on Telecommunications Access

Areas of Consensus

- All individuals should have access to wireless phones. We cannot leave millions of Americans behind as we move to a completely wireless environment. The first two prongs of the review standard have been satisfied (public interest; harm to hard of hearing people)
- Wireless phones create interference for consumers who use hearing aids.
- The goal is to achieve usability of wireless phones.
- A multifaceted, rather than a single solution, will likely be needed to achieve usability. Inductive coupling needs to be reviewed for its appropriateness and effectiveness in a wireless environment. Modern wireless approaches that deploy new wireless technologies – *e.g.*, Bluetooth – may hold promise for compatibility and need to be explored.
- The HAC Act mandates an internal means of compatibility. External accessories may assist some, but are considered burdensome by many, and do not comply with the HAC Act.
- Ongoing dialogue and collaborative research and testing are needed. Coordination among the wireless industry, the hearing aid and cochlear implant industries, consumers, audiologists, research facilities, the FCC, and the FDA is critical.
- Consumer education is critical – consumers are now unaware of digital options. Information for consumers is needed to enable them to know which phones and hearing aids are best for their individual hearing needs.
- Analog services cannot serve as a long-term substitute for digital services.

RERC Submissions

- There has been little visible progress by the wireless industry to voluntarily design HAC solutions over the past six years.
- The HAC Act requires action by the wireless industry. Responsibility cannot solely be shifted to the hearing aid industry. Standards for compatibility are needed to prevent costly purchases of hearing aids from being the sole option for consumers. Hearing aid selection hinges on many factors, not only wireless digital phone use.
- Measurement techniques for RF emissions and hearing aid immunity can prove valuable, but cannot substitute for technical standards on compatibility. If adopted as part of the solution, these techniques cannot be voluntary.
- For now, inductive coupling with telecoil-equipped hearing aids is the only known means of compatibility. However, there is also a need for acoustic coupling with digital handsets.
- Reliance on the models of foreign nations is misplaced and overstated.
- There is a need to acknowledge differences in the way that different digital transmission technologies interact with hearing aids. Wireless providers need to convey these differences to consumers.
- Compatibility features are presently available in marketed handsets.
- A six month negotiated rulemaking, followed by an industry-consumer forum can allow the active exchange of essential information and achieve compatibility solutions for the future.
- The FCC should ensure access to analog services at the point of sale until digital access is fully available – possible jurisdictional avenues are Section 255, Part 22, HAC proceeding.

Summary of RERC Proposals

- Two compatible digital telephones within two years. Commission to set a benchmark for manufacturers of at least two digital wireless telephone models that are compatible with hearing aids and cochlear implants within two years of the effective date of the Commission's regulations.
- Three compatible digital telephones within three years. By the third year after the effective date of the rule, Commission to increase the number of compatible models to three.
- Consumer education. During the interim limited-exemption period, Commission to require manufacturers and service providers to undertake significant efforts to educate consumers about interim HAC features
- Reporting requirement. Commission to require reports at least twice yearly from manufacturers of digital wireless telephones until the requirements have been satisfied.
- Continuation of analog phones and service. Until accessible handsets begin to appear, Commission to require that consumers be able to buy HAC analog phones and services through carriers that have offered analog service, and that existing analog customers be allowed to retain analog service without a reduction in service quality.
- Full compliance by 2006. Commission to set a deadline of July 1, 2006 for achievement of hearing aid compatible handsets.